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ABSTRACT

This booklet, which is written for adult literacy practitioners in Australia, argues that adult literacy practitioners working as trainers and assessors must become familiar with the tasks and texts used by competent workers in particular occupations and industries, and must understand how those tasks and texts fit within the broader social environments of individual workplaces. The booklet begins with a discussion of the concept of integrated literacy and the importance of determining which communication skills are required in specific workplaces and how those skills can be demonstrated in the workplace. The next section of the booklet examines two activities that are regularly performed by trainee clerks in city council offices: (1) face-to-face receipting of rate payments and updating of council files; and (2) official recording of complaints. The literacy competencies required by trainees for both activities are identified, the transcript of the talk occurring while the activities are performed is presented, and the competencies displayed by trainees are analyzed and compared with the currently authorized competencies. The booklet ends by considering the implications of the analysis for literacy trainers and teachers. The booklet contains 15 references. Appended is an explanation of the transcription notations used in the document. (MN)

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LITERACY PRACTICES AND CLERICAL COMPETENCY STANDARDS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINERS AND ASSESSORS

Ann Kelly
Griffith University

ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH NETWORK

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LITERACY PRACTICES AND CLERICAL COMPETENCY STANDARDS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINERS AND ASSESSORS

Ann Kelly

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Literacy Practices and Clerical Competency Standards: Implications for trainers and assessors

Ann Kelly

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All enquiries in relation to this publication should be addressed to:
Publications and Clearinghouse Manager
Language Australia
GPO Box 372F
Melbourne VIC 3001

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Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude for the patience and tolerance shown by Trudy Westaway of the Wambo Shire Council and Alanna Allen of the Caloundra City Council, the two trainees whose office practices are recorded in the transcripts in this booklet. I would also like to thank their supervisors as well as my colleagues, Jean Searle and Carolyn Baker, for their support and advice prior to and during the writing of this publication.

Introduction

Castleton (1998) suggests that for too long, adult literacy practitioners have relied on school-based, and thus, generalisable and transferable notions of literacy content that may be inappropriate for preparing workers for specific positions. In this booklet, I support this view. I argue that what is needed now, as we take up our new roles of trainers and assessors, is to become familiar with the tasks and texts that competent workers in particular occupations and industries use and to understand how they fit within the broader social environments of individual workplaces.

I begin by noting that while the concept of an "integrated literacy" has been accepted by the field and by others, there are often limitations in its practice. To explicate my position, I examine two activities that are associated with the position of level three clerical-administrative trainee and then draw implications for literacy practitioners who are required increasingly to provide vocational training and assessment to meet specific competency standards.

Integrated literacy

The linguistic term, *integrated literacy*, has become a kind of password for entry by adult literacy practitioners into the various forms of workplace training. No longer do we expect to conduct programs and assessments that are divorced from the contextual features that characterise workers' lives. Instead, we are conscious of the need to examine the competencies that have been ratified as reflecting the skills and knowledge that specific workers need to perform their occupational roles effectively. Yet, within this cognitive space, I believe that two myths remain.

Firstly, literacy training, and indeed, literacy education, is still perceived, generally, as a response to an individual's deficit state, a remedial measure. Further, there are only two groups considered within this discourse: "illiterates" and "others". This perception remains despite the years of work by adult literacy researchers, policy advisers and practitioners to show how literacy learning is likely to occur across the whole gamut of activities that people engage in throughout their lives. Secondly, there is a belief that we should be identifying, teaching to, and assessing the underlying literacy competencies within authorised standards documents without taking the previous step of critiquing the standards themselves. In the recent ANTA publication, *A new assessment tool: Incorporating language, literacy and numeracy skills into training packages – a professional development kit for trainers and assessors* (undated), trainers and assessors are given the following advice:

> *analyse the Standards you will be using to know what communication (presumably language, literacy and numeracy) [original comment] skills are required and how these skills can be demonstrated in the workplace. Make sure you know* ***exactly*** *[original emphasis] what is required to demonstrate competency to the required level (p. 43).*

A reading of these words would lead to the assumption that the standards that have been developed are appropriate.

To address these two myths, I have chosen to focus on two common activities performed regularly by AQF level three trainee clerks employed in city council offices. These activities are (i) the face-to-face receipting of a rate payment and the simultaneous updating of a council file, and (ii) the official recording of a complaint. The choice of level three trainees was deliberate as this level is the usual entry point for trainee clerks. In addition, traineeships are directly linked to standards. When traineeships

are signed, the trainees enter a formalised and structured arrangement whereby defined and authorised competencies are expected to be attained over the course of a year. Thus, the level three competency units, elements and performance criteria are critical factors in the training and assessment of these potential clerks.

To examine the literacy competencies required by level three trainees, firstly, the two activities are examined separately. Within each activity, I list and critique the authorised related competencies. I then present a transcript of the talk that takes place while the activity is being performed. Next, I analyse the competencies that are displayed by the trainees and compare these with the authorised ones. Finally, I draw implications from this comparison for literacy trainers and assessors who are likely to become involved increasingly in the relationships between literacy practices and competency standards.

(i) Receipting rate payments and updating electronic files

The related authorised competencies and their performance criteria

An activity that one trainee regularly engaged in was the receipting of council payments and the simultaneous updating of the relevant electronic files. These payments were often posted to the council but there were occasions when customers paid using a face-to-face mode. Interpersonal encounters with customers required skills and knowledge to be displayed by the trainee, additional to those necessary for mailed payments.

An examination of the level three *National Clerical-Administrative Competency Standards (Private Sector)* (1997) document reveals that there are three skill areas that pertain to this activity (Information Handling, Technology and Business Financial. Within the Information Handling skill area there is one unit of competence, 'maintain information records system to ensure its integrity'. However, the three elements of this unit, 'assemble new files', 'identify and process inactive and dead files' and 'record documentation movements' do not appear to apply to the receipting of payments and the updating of related files *(National clerical-administrative competency standards,* 1997, 29). It is noticeable that there is no element of competency, no performance criteria or no texts, either material or electronic, that are identified as integral to the maintenance of an information records system by means of the recording of payments for services.

Within the technology category, there is a relevant unit of competence, 'use the advanced functions of a range of office equipment to complete daily tasks'. This unit contains two elements of competence: 'operate equipment' and 'complete tasks'. In the case of the first element, competence is judged according to the following three performance criteria: 'the range of the equipment's functions is known', 'a range of advanced functions of office equipment is used'; and 'advanced functions are operated correctly'. In relation to the second element, 'the task is completed (by) coordinating the advanced functions of a range of office equipment within designated timelines' *(National clerical-administrative competency standards,* 1997, 88). Not only are these competencies presented

in a generalised form of language, but there is no recognition firstly, that cognitive and social interactive processes are likely to enacted in concert with technological ones. For example, trainees check forms and interact with customers while updating databases; and secondly, the particular technologies that are chosen and the functions of these that are relevant are not pre-determined.

In the business financial skill area, the third unit of competence is concerned with the 'monitor(ing of) cash control for accounting purposes'. One element of competence applies in this case: 'receive and document payments/takings'. Trainees are assessed with respect to whether 'cash is correctly counted and, where applicable, correct change is given'; 'cheque and credit card payments are verified with the nominated person/department prior to acceptance' and 'receipts are accurately completed and issued' *(National clerical-administrative competency standards,* 1997, 172). Again, there is no mention of the social competencies that underpin this activity. Further, while there may be implicit recognition of the literacy skills necessary to issue a receipt, the detailed way that clerks operating on-line manage this process is not explicated. As a result, their expertise is not visible.

In analysing the transcript of the rate payment I was interested in noting the literacy and other competencies that were displayed and how the specific texts that were used served to mediate these processes.

The actual competencies

A transcript of a rate payment receipting and updating activity that took place on 28 August 1988 is presented below to show how the trainee [T] and customer [C] worked together to manage the successful performance of this interaction. A glossary of codes and their meanings may be found in Appendix A.

Transcript 1

((sound of steps approaching, thirteen in total. T is standing at the counter)))

1	T	↑hi how are you↓
2		((two more steps))
3	C	[not too bad thanks]
4		(([two more steps]))
5		((one final step))
6	T	°that's good°
7	C	<u>just come up to pay some ra:tes</u>

8 T ↑(right
9 C hhh-
10 T hhh-hhh-hhh-hhh
11 (2.0)
12 C here they are ((C hands over account))
13 (2.0)
14 C just haven't written out the cheque book though
15 (4.0) ((T goes to computer and keys in data relating to C's
16 account))
17 C do you have a biro [over] there
18 T [yeh] sure
19 (1.0) ((T goes to desk, picks up a biro and hands it to C.))
20 C thanks
21 (23.0) (T returns to computer and continues to key in C's data))
22 C how much is on that [one] ((the account))
23 T [it's] actually a hundred and ninety-seven
24 sixty two (.) not sixty three (.) cents
25 (1.0)
26 C aah
27 T °I'll just change that° ((on C's account))
28 (5.0) ((T continues to key in C's data))
29 C °you need my signature for the change°
30 T ye:↑p ((T returns to counter.))
31 C ri:ght ((C initialises account and T returns to computer and
32 keying in of data.))
33 (11.0)
34 C hhh-:: boy isn't it hot
35 (1.0)
36 T it's hot out(side is (it=
37 C =mmm
38 (3.0)
39 T hhh-hhh-hhh-hhh
40 T that's a shame (.) it's been lovely the last few days
41 C mm
42 (10.0)
43 C (driving) in the car was hot
44 T o:h hhh-hhh right there
45 (13.0)
45 C and then I might be racing a (.) round a little bit [mighn't I]
46 mightn't
47 T [rushing
48 everywhere] hhh-hhh-hhh
49 (3.0)

50 (11.0) ((T continues to key in C's data and then returns to
51 counter.))
52 T thank↑you ((T takes C's cheque payment.))
53 (14.0) ((further keystrokes))
54 (5.0) ((sound of printer generating receipt))
55 (2.0)
56 (2.0) ((sound of original receipt being torn from printer roll))
57 (3.0)
58 C hhh-
59 T there we go [thanks very much]
60 C [thanks a lot]
61 T ↓bye bye
62 ((sound of sixteen steps receding))

As can be noted by the lengthy silences[1] in turns 21 (twenty-three seconds), 42 (ten seconds), 45 (thirteen seconds), 50 (eleven seconds) and 53 (fourteen seconds), the trainee engages at some length in recording the client's details on a data base. In addition, it might be presumed that she has completed the task within acceptable time limits because there is no evident concern expressed by either the client or herself about the time this activity has taken.

With respect to relevant elements of competency within the business financial skill area, the cheque is not 'verified for acceptance by a second staff member'. However, the trainee assumes the responsibility for selecting the amount displayed on the council record as the required payment rather than that written on the account (turns 22 to 27). While the discrepancy is minimal (one cent), the authority that is displayed by the trainee is noticeable.

In issuing the receipt, the official element of competency, 'receipts are accurately completed and issued', is far too general to represent the matching and detailing of the information on the cheque and the account that is performed by the trainee. A copy of the screen that is used in this process is reproduced in Figure 1 on the facing page.

In addition to the lack of fit that is evident between the authorised competencies and the actual practices, there is a serious absence of recognition of the social competencies that are displayed by the trainee in this interaction. In particular, the trainee effectively greets (turns 1-6) and farewells the customer (59-61), responds to her request for a biro (turns 17 – 20), affiliates with her through engagement in small talk (turns 34 – 48) (Hayakaya, 1978; Laver, 1975) and laughter (turns 10, 39, 44 and 48) (Glenn,

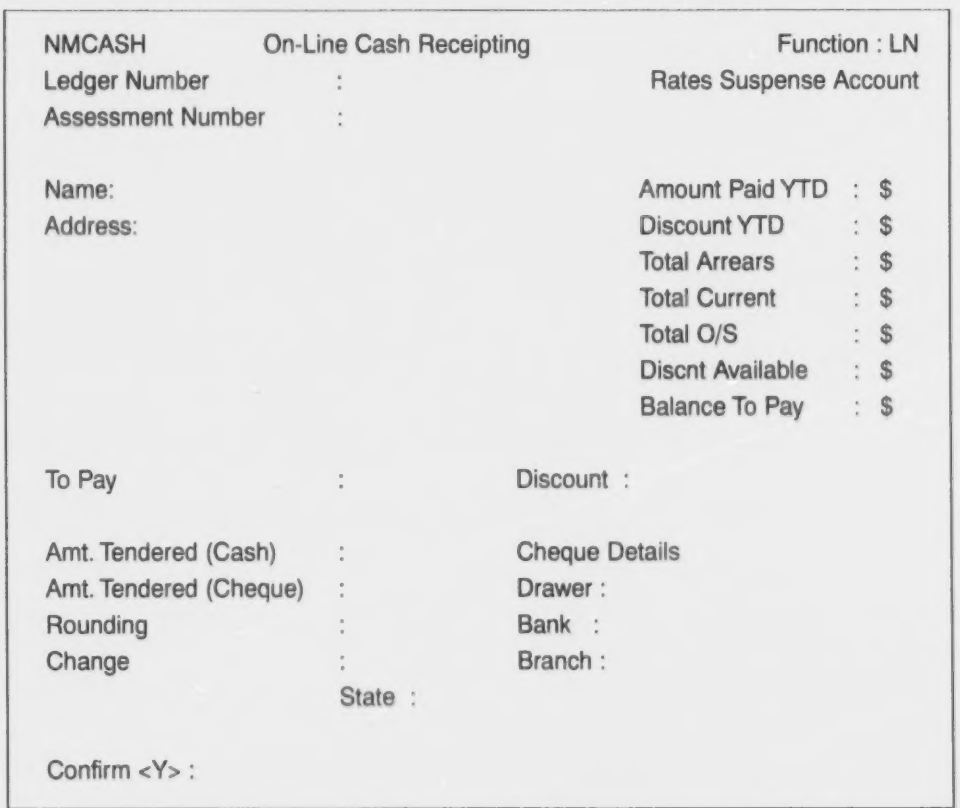
1991/92; Jefferson, 1979); and manages the silences, some quite extended, between them in a way that does not appear to irritate the customer.

Text usage in this activity

In addition to the spoken text which occurs throughout the activity, four written texts are crucial in the performance of this activity. These comprise the customer's account, the electronic screen on which data are entered, the cheque and finally, the receipt that is issued. These four texts are used in an integrated way in this interaction by the trainee to ensure that the transaction is completed accurately and efficiently.

While it is not a requirement for customers to produce their account when they pay their rates, its production is helpful to the trainee because it provides a cue to the type of transaction that will be enacted. Indeed, the word "rates", when entered into the council data base, results in the initial screen relating to rate payments becoming visible to the trainee. The availability of the account, and thus the rate payer's details, also allows

Figure 1: On-line cash receipting screen: Rate suspense account



the trainee to select the correct electronic account quickly. In line 15 of the transcript, which is quite early in the interaction, the trainee begins to match the personal details of the property owner on the account with those on the screen and to key in additional information. Finally, the account is useful, because through this matching process, it is possible for the trainee to notice discrepancies between the information on the account and that on the screen. As noted above, such a discrepancy occurs in this case.

The entering of data onto the electronic screen is time-consuming and indeed, along with the issuing of a receipt, a process with which it is seamlessly integrated, is the purpose of the activity. In order to effect this stage of the interaction competently, not only does the trainee need to be able to decode the symbols on the keyboard and the data base program accurately, but she also must know the optimal pathway to take to display the correct screens, be able to interpret the codes on these and key the data into the appropriate categories. Finally, there is a critical role that is played by the trainee in appreciating and acting on the fact that the information in the data system about customer dues should override that displayed on material accounts that are mailed to customers (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

Summary

As I suggested in the introduction, it may be a mistake for literacy trainers and assessor to assume that their role is restricted to inserting literacy competencies directly into industry or occupational competency standards that have been authorised. As I have shown in my examination of a receipt payment activity, the competencies that have been set as benchmarks fail to represent accurately the actual details of the practice that the customers and clerks engage in. In some cases, the official competencies are irrelevant; in others, they are too general. Further, the omission of social competencies indicates a failure on the part of developers to recognise the social interaction that is critical to the face-to-face modes of this activity. In addition, the competencies should not be perceived as occupying discrete skill areas. Rather, they are used in an integrated way to produce a result that is efficient and satisfactory to all parties.

(ii) Recording a complaint

The related authorised competencies and their performance criteria

The processing of customer complaints is accorded a high status within the national clerical-administrative competency framework – that of a unit of competence. The related elements and performance criteria are also more detailed than in the case of receipting rate payments. Table 1 below lists these elements and criteria.

Table 1: ENT 301: Process client complaints to ensure the goals of the enterprise are met

(National clerical-administrative competency standard: private sector, 1997, 67)

Element of competency	Performance criteria
Clarify the nature of the complaint	• Details of the complaint are established • Summary of the complaint is recorded accurately • Any inconvenience to the client is acknowledged and an apology is made if appropriate
Identify options for complaint resolution	• Appropriate options for resolving the complaint are identified • Complaint referred to designated officer if resolution is not possible
Act to resolve complaint	• Optimal solution is negotiated with the client • Chosen solution is implemented within agreed time frame • Necessary documentation is finalised • Effectiveness of solution and related outcomes is evaluated • Any necessary changes to enterprise procedures are identified and passed on to relevant person for action

The processing of customer complaints has been conceptualised as a three-stage logical sequence and supported by details in the form of performance criteria that appear to be comprehensive. After a cursory reading, it might be presumed that the integration of literacy

competencies within this framework could be accomplished much more easily than in the example of the rate payment activity. It is noticeable, however, that there is no recognition of the need to greet customers or clients.

The actual competencies

A transcript relating to a telephone complaint that was recorded on 10 September 1998 is presented below. As previously, the initial "T" denotes the trainee and "C" the customer. Names mentioned in the text have been changed and the greeting sequence and the initial introduction of the topic have not been recorded because of an omission in turning on the tape recorder at that point.

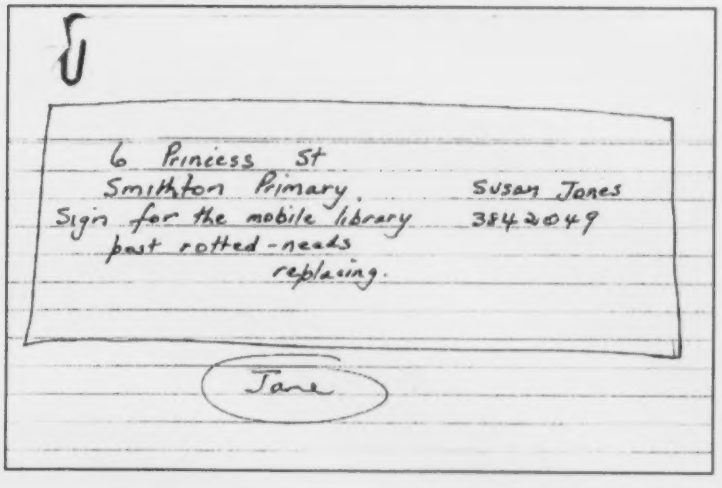
Transcript 2

1	C	the li:brary
2		(1.0)
3		posts have rotted and are unsafe (.)
4	T	the
5	C	the (.) children are actually pushing and moving the sign
6	T	the: si:gn for: the:=
7	C	=mobile library outside the schoo:l (.)
8		(1.0)
9	T	okay↑=what's= school's= this= sorry↑
10	C	smithton↓
11	T	smithton
12		(1.0)
13	T	primary↑
14	C	°yes°
15		(3.0)
16	T	o:kay what was your name then↑=
17	C	=sue jones
18	T	sue jones (.) an:d your contact phone number
19	C	384 2049
20		(1.0)
21	T	so the sign for the (.) mobile library=
22	C	=yeh (.) the the posts have ro:tted
24	T	o:kay
25		(1.0)
26	C	uh huh
27		(1.0)
28	T	I'll put in a service request for you and get (.) u:m those posts replaced and (.) and um
29		(3.0)

30 hopefully (.) that'll fix the problem for you
31 C okay=
32 T =they're they're pulling it out of the ground are they↑
33 (1.0)
34 those signs
35 C we:ll (.) ugh (.) it's unsafe anyway the kids are (.) are actually pushing and moving the sign and we had one child
36 (1.0)
37 trying to break them off the other afternoon (.) so: yeh
38 T aah o:kay=
39 C =but they are (.) I mean they are a danger cause they are rotted (.)
40 T yeh (.) okay↑ well I'll report that and get something done for you sue=
41 C =thank you very much
42 T okay↑
43 C bye
31 T bye

When this transcript is compared to the official elements of competency and performance criteria, parallels can be noted. For example, the trainee allows the complainant to give her perspective on the problem in lines 1, 3, 7, 22 and 39 (Maynard, 1991). This viewpoint is accepted virtually as it is presented by the trainee who engages in a series of clarifying questions which serve to meet the demands of the council to produce a bureaucratic text (Smith, 1990) that includes relevant details. Figure 2 (below), which is a reproduction of the notes that were taken by the trainee during the course of the conversation, contains these details.

Figure 2: Notes of complaint



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When we turn to the Customer Service Request (Figure 3), it can be noted that the details that have been recorded in note form have been slotted into specific places on this form However, the *Details* section contains information from the call that was not recorded in the notes – "This is a danger as the children in the school swing on it and try to pull it out etc...".

The second performance criteria relating to the processing of customer complaints, the development of a written summary of the complaint, can be tracked through the transcript and seen in the *Summary* section of the Customer Service Request text (Figure 3). This summary statement is very similar to the summary that was produced in note form during the conversation "Sign for the mobile library post rotted". (See Figure 2 above.)

The third performance criteria relating to the clarification stage – "Any inconvenience to the client is acknowledged and an apology is made if appropriate" – however, is not evident in the transcript. One reason for this omission by the trainee may be that the complainant is not personally affected by this problem.

The second and third elements of competency – "identify options for complaint resolution" and "act to resolve complaint" – have been achieved by the trainee in this activity. In turns 28 to 30, she informs the complainant that she "will put in a service request for you and get those posts replaced and hopefully that'll fix the problem for you". The caller accepts this action as evidenced by her response of "okay" in turn 31 and "thank you very much" in turn 41. The first bureaucratic step to formalise this resolution is taken when the action is documented in the trainee's notes with the words – "sign... needs replacing". The second step is accomplished when this recommendation has been transferred to the Customer Service Request form where the condition that this be effected as soon as possible, is added.

Figure 3: Customer Service Request

Records File No :

Customer Service Request 125016

Provider Services
Works
Signage

Property No

Requestor

Name Susan Jones
Address

Telephone 1 384 2049 2

Recorded on 10-Sep-1998
by

Allocated to Bill Gale
on 10-Sep-1998

Location

Detail Smithton Primary
Extra Detail 6 Princess St

Summary

Post with the mobile library sign on it is rotted.

Details

This is a danger as the children in the school swing on it and try to pull it out etc...

Please arrange for replacement of this post ASAP.

Thankyou.

Action Taken

Reinspected

On / / in the presence of

Signature Date / /

Expected Completion Date 10-Sep-1998

Actual Completion Date

Advised Requestor (Yes/No)

CUALLOC QRP 10-Sep-1998 10:04:39 AM

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Text usage in this activity

In contrast to the rate payment activity, where the spoken text that was generated during the interaction was important to the successful performance of the activity, spoken text in the response to a complaint is **critical** and indeed, **foundational**. The two other texts produced in this activity, the notes and the completed Customer Services Request form, result directly from the spoken text. In the case of the notes, this record was developed as the conversation progressed, and both parties appear to have accepted the repetitive nature of the talk as the complaint was progressively formulated (Heritage & Watson, 1979). It is clear from the notes and the service form that the relevant details have been agreed upon and recorded for action.

Summary

In the receipting of rate payment activity, the competencies are very general and not comprehensive, the authorised competencies for the processing of client complaints, as shown in Table 1, reflect the actual competencies that are performed in this setting quite closely. If combined with the official technological competencies that have been authorised for level three trainees, they provide a set of benchmarks that may be appropriate for clerical workers, generally, to follow. However, the problem with the allocation of competencies into separate skill areas remains.

Implications for literacy trainers and teachers

As I have shown in the example of the activity of processing a complaint, the incorporation of literacy competencies into industry and occupational standards may be achieved relatively unproblematically. All that may be required is the addition of further performance criteria or details in the range statements and evidence guides. However, the first example that is presented in this booklet, the receipting and recording of a rate payment, is not so straight-forward. The competency elements and performance criteria that have been ratified are not adequate in reflecting the actual competencies that are required to perform the task satisfactorily.

It must be remembered, though, that prior to making a decision about how incorporation might be effected, it is imperative that trainers and assessors have a clear understanding of the actual practices in which their clients regularly engage. There will be some, and perhaps, many in the field who have gained this knowledge through roles such as that of enterprise teacher. For other trainers and assessors, however, it will be necessary for them to observe these clients performing in their work settings at some length, collect relevant texts, including copies of competency standards that apply, and perhaps talk with the clients about their interpretations of their work and how it is managed. A number of models such as those developed by Drew and Mikulecky (1988) and Taylor and Lewe (1990) may be useful in this process. It must be noted, however, that the accumulation of this knowledge will take time and there will be a cost that will probably not be recouped.

A further step, however, is required by practitioners. Those general pedagogies and contents that were underpinned by an assumption of their direct transfer to specific practices may no longer be viable for ensuring workers attain competency standards. Thus, practitioners who are involved in delivering training modules related to specific standards will not only be required to consider a range of modes of this delivery but in addition, they will need to explore how learning might be structured so that it is attained in the most effective and efficient ways possible, while simultaneously remaining relevant to specific worksites. This requirement is challenging but not impossible to meet. Adult literacy workers have shown consistently that they can deliver quality programs that are both innovative and flexible. Further, they are members of a professional field which is continually critiquing practice and responding to the changing

needs of our various client groups. Through networking with others and developing and implementing "best" practices, there is an opportunity for adult literacy practitioners to occupy vanguard positions to ensure that literacy doesn't continue to be perceived as a personal stigma that can be addressed through "more of the same" learning practices and that standards that are appropriate to workers continue to be developed.

Note

1. In a review of 320 sets of informal conversational data that she had collected over a considerable period of time, Jefferson (1987, p. 170) found that silences of approximately one second were the 'standard maximum' length that were common. Indeed, five-second silences were the longest inter-utterances that she had encountered.

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Appendix

Transcription notation (Psathas 1995)

[ ]	simultaneous utterance
=	latching of utterances
(1.0)	timed intervals in seconds between and within utterances
(.)	untimed intervals within utterances of less than a second
(( ))	description
XYZ	loud delivery
°	soft delivery
:	sound stretch
underlining	stressed phonemes or words
↑ ↓	intonational markers

The publication of the Research into Practice Series is one strategy to implement the dissemination of research. The aim is to provide a series of booklets on different aspects of adult literacy in order to:

- *establish a knowledge base regarding adult literacy practice and research*
- *raise awareness about adult literacy*
- *bring research and practice together*

The authors of the booklets, who are recognised experts in their field, were invited to write for an audience of literacy practitioners in the community, TAFE, university, ACTU, industry and private providers. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Language Australia.

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